

Lihue shows signs of maturing

It's a town with bit of this and that scattered about

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Hawaii's main Neighbor Island towns — from Lihue on Kauai to Hilo on the Big Island — are unique gathering places for people from throughout the state. Each has a definite atmosphere and reputation. And each has to deal with new influences which bring inevitable change in the town's life. The Advertiser's Neighbor Island bureaus are taking periodic glances into these main streets of Hawaii.

By Jan TenBruggencate
Advertiser Kauai Bureau

LIHUE — There's a lot about Lihue that argues against its being Kauai's county seat.

It's not on the water, as Wailuku-Kahului, Hilo and Honolulu are, and it doesn't really have a traditional downtown.

There's no nightlife to speak of and it's not even in the most populous district.

What Lihue does have is a central location and the comparatively recent establishment of the island's main airport and seaport nearby.

In a sense, Lihue is a town without history. Its name isn't even local — it came from a spot near Schofield Barracks on Oahu, apparently the original home of one of Kauai's governors of the 1800s.

In the early days, the district now called Lihue was Puna, and in those days Waimea, and later Koloa, were the centers of trade and transport for Kauai. Port Allen, at Hanapepe, was a prime harbor, and the early airports were on West Kauai, too. They were at Mana, where the Pacific Missile Range Facility still has a strip, and at Hanapepe's Salt Pond, where the abandoned Burns Field still lies.

Eventually, a central location and nearness to Oahu won out, and a breakwater made nearby Nawiliwili a harbor that would eclipse others. And on the plain between Ninini Point and Ahukini, an airstrip was laid out, never mind that it's got a downhill slope to the north, a fact pilots still complain about.

The seeds of Lihue's development into the capital were sown in the mid-1800s. Most of the island's early governors lived in the district. The court met nearby.

And two major sugar plantations, Lihue Plantation and Grove Farm Co., started near here.

Author Carol Wilcox, in the Kauai Historical Society's new publication, The Kauai Album, takes it from there.

"Annexation of Hawaii in 1898 assured economic stability for the plantations. As Kauai grew, so did the need for more sophisticated governmental and commercial services, as well as an improved transportation system. In short, the island needed a capital.

"Why Lihue, several miles inland from Nawiliwili, was chosen for that capital is not entirely clear," she said.

It started around the Lihue Plantation headquarters. Up came the new County Building in 1913, today the oldest continually used county building in Hawaii, according to Wilcox. A group of other stone or concrete buildings, many architect-designed, came up in the area.

"These buildings were expensive, immovable, fire-proof, durable. In short, they were sturdy anchors insuring that a community would spring up around them," she wrote.

Unlike older towns in Hawaii, Lihue grew up in an age of motorized transportation. Instead of having a compact business district, the town spread out along two roads — Rice Street and Kuhio Highway, which are at right angles to each other. Inside that right angle are a cluster of government buildings, the Lihue Shopping Center and a couple of banks, but little else. On the outside of the right angle is Nawiliwili Stream's valley and the Lihue Mill.

There are housing developments scattered around. Some old camp housing along the valley. Molokoa inside the angle, Isenberg Tract out on one side of Kuhio Highway. Kupolo and Lihue Town Estates off Rice Street, and projects like Ulukukui and Ulu Mahi on the other side of Nawiliwili Valley. The 1976 Lihue Development Plan recognized this lack of cohesiveness.

"Lihue exhibits the character of a small town. Its buildings are low in profile and residential in character. Growth in Lihue has been largely unplanned and,

as a result, has a somewhat disorganized appearance especially in the non-residential areas," the plan says.

And activity seems to be moving away from the town's central area. Lihue's two movie theaters have closed during the past decade, and the nearest theater for the residents is now the resort area of Waipouli.

Kauai's first shopping center, opened in the mid-'60s, was the Lihue Shopping Center, right at the intersection of Rice and Kuhio. Owner Amfac sold it in the early '70s to financier Harry Weinberg, who is negotiating to sell it to the county, which considers it a possible new County Building. Meanwhile many office and store locations stand vacant and maintenance is poor.

Down Rice Street, there's a furniture store war on between kamaaina Kawakami's and malihini BJ's Furniture. BJ's took over the old building that housed the now-defunct Kress Store. Next door is the Rice Shopping Center, developed by the family that owns Kawakami's and the Big Save and Ben Franklin market chain.

There's something overshadowing all the traditional Lihue business activity. It's the mid-1982 opening of the massive Kukui Grove Center, a 60-acre facility that will be the biggest shopping center on the Neighbor Islands when it opens.

Lihue business people, government officials and even those involved in the new center expect a slowdown in business when it opens, simply because the same number of dollars will be spread across so much more retail space.

"It's kind of scary," said one veteran businessman who's moving into Kukui Grove Center. It'll be slow at first, but it's the place to be eventually, he said.

There are county officials who don't think the island is quite ready for such a leap in retail space, but Grove Farm Co. President David W. Pratt, who's developing the center, sees it as a natural progression for Lihue.

"There's no question there will be some effect. Perhaps the nature of downtown Lihue will change.

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going more to offices, just like the nature of downtown Honolulu has changed over the last 50 years.

"Shopping centers take up a lot of space, and you don't have that downtown," he said. The new center is across Nawiliwili Valley toward Puhi.

Pratt expects there eventually will be more four-story buildings (the county's general height limit) in town, with the central area beginning to be, perhaps, more of a traditional downtown than today.

There is a sense of change, of maturing, about the town even today.

Culturally, there has long been only the Kauai Museum, but things are changing. The island's artists have banded together, and there are several commercial art galleries today, including The Art Shop, Kahana Kii Fine Art Gallery and Stones Printsellers & Gallery.

There are regular art shows at the State Building, the Lihue Public Library, the Kauai Museum and at a group of financial institutions.

As the town has moved from a plantation village to county capital, it has lost much of its plantation feeling, but that's being saved at the Grove Farm Homestead museum across Nawiliwili Valley. Here are the old plantation camp houses, the duck and chicken pens, the original house of Grove Farm founder George N. Wilcox and many of the towering trees he planted a century ago.

The Lihue Mill still operates, redolent of molasses and mud and bagasse, decades old, but linked to an ultra-modern fiber-burning power plant that's hooked into the island's municipal electric lines.

Lihue prints two newspapers: the venerable, four-times-weekly Garden Island and the weekly Kauai Times, funded largely by builders, real estate and other business people who detected an anti-business approach in the Garden Island's pages.

There's even competition in cookies. As people leave Maui with Dewey Kobayashi's potato chips,

they traditionally left Kauai with sacks of Tip Top Bakery macadamia nut cookies. But the Big Save chain decided to move in, and now markets Kauai Kookies, in macadamia nut and a variety of other flavors.

Pratt hopes the new shopping center will take on regional characteristics, bringing people from all over the island to shop, and perhaps keeping people on Kauai who traditionally shop in Honolulu.

Mayor Eduardo Malapit hopes to expand the two-year Kauai Community College at Puhi, just two miles outside town, to four years. And Kauai High School, already a regional school in the sense it handles students who live from Hanamaulu to Kalaheo, will soon pick up more youngsters as the seventh and eighth graders from Koloa and Kalaheo schools move there.

It's clear, though, that while Lihue is a place people come to for school, for shopping and for work, it's no bedroom. It ranks fourth among the island's five districts in population and third in the number of housing units.

Aside from sunny Poipu and resort locations, residential property values in Lihue are some of the highest, ranging, according to one real estate broker, from about \$125,000 to \$150,000. But of course, in these times of high interest, little sells, he added.

With its little communities scattered and much of its working population from out of town, Lihue lacks the community spirit of the traditional plantation towns like Kekaha.

People in Hanalei have been known to organize and fight together on issues like the proposal to tear down the Hanalei Bridge, and those in Koloa have joined forces to talk roads and where to put a post office.

But while Lihue's outlying communities, like Hanamaulu and Niimalu, have sometimes been organized, the main town never has. Perhaps it's simply that an appropriate issue hasn't surfaced.

Public hearings at the County Building in Lihue regularly draw fewer participants than those in, say, Koloa or Hanalei. Perhaps it's just that the people in the community of Pua Loke can't be bothered by

Isenberg Tract's problems, and that Mo concern to lower Kupolo.

Lihue, from the first, has lacked clear direction. The county's General Plan is just 10 years old. The Lihue Development Plan just five years old. Lihue simply hasn't been much direction.

But the town's increasing importance in civic affairs seems assured by growing centers in economic areas, in culture, in education, in sports.

Perhaps it's just that someone has been making the effort. It's interesting to note that courtship efforts around the civic center are being felt. Trees planted within the park years ago are near adulthood now. You find them under them in the shade.

The other day someone was juggling in front of the County Building. People have been coming sometimes these days, and mothers bring their children between bursts of shopping, to play. Maybe Lihue finally is gaining a sense of direction.